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IMMIGRANT RURAL COMMUNITIES

BY

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Amherst, Massachusetts

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IMMIGRANT RURAL COMMUNITIES

BY ALEXANDER E. CANCE, PH.D.,

Department of Agricultural Economics, Massachusetts Agricultural College.

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The problem of the immigrant is largely industrial. Its essence lies in the concentration of incoming foreigners in urban and industrial centers, in the competition for labor and in the keeping down of the wages of living and the standard of comfort of the established workman. These problems and a host of others, social, political and moral, growing out of their congestion, poverty and ignorance of things American, have, until recently, had little or no apparent significance in the rural districts where foreigners have settled.

Nevertheless, the foreigner has played a very prominent part in the agricultural development not only of the great West and Southwest, but of New England. The lure of free land, unbroken, rich, suited to pioneers willing to undergo privations and hardships for the sake of landed property, attracted a steady, sturdy influx from northern and western Europe, which continued through the seventies and eighties but slackened somewhat by 1895, when the supply of free land began to be pretty well exhausted. In the upper Mississippi Valley rural groups or settlements of foreign-born are so widespread and frequent that a township of Bohemian, German or Scandinavian farmers excites no comment and invites no comparisons. They have improved the land, organized the agriculture, shaped the social institutions and influenced the political situation. Most of them are very thoroughly Americanized—at any rate they have become thoroughly imbued with the American spirit, have lost most of their distinctive race characteristics and are well recognized and permanently established elements in western rural life.

More recently, however, and perhaps more especially in the East, South, Southwest and Pacific coast, certain small compact communities of foreigners have been settling. They belong to the newer immigration, originating largely in southern and southeastern Europe, and they represent what may be denominated the



agriculturally doubtful races. Racially they are Slavs, Italians, Hebrews, Portuguese, a few Greeks, Belgians and some Orientals. It is of certain characteristics of these rural folk that this paper will deal.

The Federal Census of 1900 reported about nine and one-half million male breadwinners engaged in agricultural pursuits in the United States. Three-fifths of these were native whites, born of native parents, about one-sixth were negroes, and the remainder, some 2,100,000, were of foreign origin, *i. e.*, born of foreign parents. Taking no account of the Chinese, Japanese, Indians and other colored persons, the males of foreign lineage constituted in 1900 more than one-fourth (25.4 per cent) of all white males in agriculture—certainly an element to be reckoned with. Viewed from the standpoint of immigration, something like one-fourth of all male breadwinners of foreign parentage in the United States were engaged in agriculture in 1900. The occupational statistics of the census of 1910 have not yet been published, but they will certainly show an increasing number of recent immigrants entering rural pursuits; neither the absolute nor the relative numbers at the present time can be estimated with any degree of accuracy.

The United States Immigration Commission made a partial investigation of recent rural immigrants from southern Europe, and in the course of their study personally visited more than 150 immigrant settlements, representing many different forms of agriculture in nineteen states, chiefly along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, where many incipient communities have recently taken root. Several colonies also, largely Polish or Italian, that have recently established themselves in the Middle West, were included in the studies of the commission.

In general, the groups are racially homogeneous. Moreover, as races they bear certain common characteristics of some economic significance. In the first place, although a large percentage of them were born and bred in rural districts abroad, comparatively few of them have found their way to the countryside in the United States; most of those who chose agriculture as a vocation became farmers immediately on their arrival in the United States. Second, as compared with the races from northern Europe, these foreigners are recent arrivals and consequently have not generally been able to acquire rich, virgin land free. Many have purchased older,

more or less improved areas, or the less desirable parcels rejected by earlier home-seekers. Third, these races are still on trial as agriculturists. They have not yet fully proved their fitness for American rural life. They are doubtful. Finally, while at present the farmers among them are relatively few in number, it is likely that our agricultural immigrants of the future will be largely recruited from the ranks of these races.

### *Seasonal Laborers and Permanent Farmers*

The early rural immigrants who came from northern Europe and made a straight trail for the woodlands and prairies of the great West years ago, were almost invariably home-seekers. Most of them entered upon virgin land as soon as they reached their destinations; others, after a very short period as farm laborers and lumbermen, invested in wagons and teams, married and began life as land owners. From the beginning they secured a firm foothold on the soil, to which they clung tenaciously. Among the more recent agricultural immigrants one may distinguish three economic classes, differentiated by their relationship to the land. First are the seasonal laborers, those having places of residence and, perhaps, a principal occupation in the city, who spend a few weeks of each year in the agricultural districts performing certain specific tasks, such as hoeing, berry-picking, vegetable gathering or the like. The second class are the regular farm laborers as we know them, who usually become land owners. The third are the land buying, farm owning immigrants, the salt of our foreign farming communities.

With the extension of market gardening, small fruit growing, cranberry bogs on a large scale, vegetable canneries and sugar-beet cultivation, the demand for seasonal labor has greatly increased. The field of employment is frequently near centers of population; summer is the season, congenial to those who would live out-of-doors, especially favorable for the employment of school children and laborers out of work, because shops have shut down and schools are closed; in general, the entire family may find employment on the same farm or enterprise and greatly reduce the cost of living by subsisting on vegetables and paying no rents. Thousands of Italians, Greeks, Poles, Portuguese and others come in contact with the land and with the open country in this way.

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The seasonal laborer has little opportunity to become an owner. He is the counterpart of the unskilled temporary laborer in industry, the day laborer on railway construction work. Specialized, capitalistic, large scale agricultural production demands efficient machines and often great gangs of comparatively cheap laborers. The cranberry industry, highly profitable when rightly managed, is absolutely dependent on an army of pickers, usually Italians, Portuguese, Poles or Indians, who can be employed for a short time during the harvesting season. Many of these laborers are aliens, laborers of the poorest sort with little ambition and few American ideals. They are frequently birds of passage, caring naught for agriculture nor rural life nor American citizenship. They serve only to make agriculture profitable to the enterpriser. Between them and land proprietorship there is a great gulf fixed, across which very few are able to pass. Careful inquiry discloses that very few seasonal farm laborers find encouragement to become owners of farms. This class of rural immigrants is the least satisfactory from any point of view, economic, social, political or moral.

The immigrant farm hand, the regular farm laborer employed by the year or the month, gets somewhat more closely in touch with the soil and with American ideals. Thousands of newcomers, fresh from their native shores, have engaged in and are finding employment on immigrant and American farms, learning the rudiments of American farming, acquiring American methods, getting a grip on the English language and saving American dollars to purchase American land. The farm laborers of New York and New England seem to be chiefly Poles, Italians, Portuguese, Canadian French, and a few other foreign-born. They are seldom wholly satisfactory farm laborers, but there is no other really available source of supply. A surprisingly large percentage of them come to love the soil and in a few years acquire some land, purchased out of their earnings. This is markedly the case where the farm laborers are newcomers of the same race as their employers.

#### *Permanent Rural Groups*

Of the somewhat more than one hundred and fifty rural communities visited by agents of the Immigration Commission, more than forty were Italian settlements. The largest, oldest and most important of these in the East are established on the sandy pine



barrens of southern New Jersey. Here perhaps seven thousand persons of foreign lineage have found permanent homes. The forbidding nature of the infertile waste of sand, swamp and woodland which characterizes the New Jersey barrens has prevented their occupation and improvement by Americans. Here and there a few poor native farmers have cleared small areas and carry on an inferior sort of agriculture, eking out their incomes by the sale of wood or low-grade timber. Three decades or more ago it was discovered that small fruits and berries could be produced profitably on newly cleared virgin land; a few Italians were induced to settle; others came to pick berries and, because land was cheap, remained to raise them; still others gathered about the first nuclei at Hammononton and Vineland, purchased small farms, cleared them and raised quantities of excellent berries and grapes. Over a limited area they have literally turned a desert into a garden. Their small holdings of five to thirty-five acres are well cultivated, planted to peaches, grapes, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and sweet potatoes, and present a lively illustration of small farming with a specialized money crop on the Atlantic seaboard.

About two decades ago berry-growing was very profitable in southern New Jersey, provided one was able to procure a supply of cheap labor. The Italian was able to compete for berry land because of his large family, willing and able to aid him from clearing to harvest, because of his low standard of comfort and his capacity for incessant manual toil. Moreover, several shops and factories gave opportunity for immediate earnings, a fact of considerable importance where land is uncleared and not immediately productive. When the land was new and profits easy a good many Americans raised berries in competition with the Italians. More recently, however, successful berry-growing has depended largely on careful tillage, hand culture and fertilization, and many of the Americans have sold out to Italians, alleging their inability to compete with them successfully.

In these communities both North Italians and Sicilians are represented, and both have made efficient farmers and responsible citizens. The community is still in the making. Here are the recent arrivals, foreign in dress, speech and conduct. They have settled on small parcels of land and are deeply in debt. The men work in the brickyards, the glass works or as common day laborers, while

wife and children care for the berry patch. Living in the better houses on the larger holdings are the older immigrants; they have passed through the long hard days of debt and pioneering, have improved their holdings and purchased more land, have built good houses and are recognized as respected members of the community, perhaps American citizens.

There is still another class, the American-born Italian. Raised on American soil, familiar with berry farming from childhood, many of them alert, active, intelligent, progressive, they are the choice fruits of American immigrant rural life. Up to the present these young men and women manifest an inclination to remain farmers. They take an active interest in community life and the business of agriculture. They are fairly prosperous, their educational, social and economic standards are higher than their parents', they are good citizens and trustworthy, and many of them are proud of their profession.

The basis of a wholesome, happy rural life is economic prosperity. Where the returns from agriculture are inadequate, it is fruitless to look for adequate social, recreative or educational institutions and enterprises except in rare instances. This truth is especially demonstrable in Slavic or Italian communities. That the New Jersey groups have established a fairly satisfactory system of public schools to which they send their children with some regularity is rather good evidence that they have been prosperous and successful farmers.

The Vineland "colony," with its miles of country roads or "streets," bearing Italian names and thickly lined with the homes of small farmers, its Italian holidays and celebrations, its churches thronged with foreign worshippers and its schools filled exclusively with pupils of Italian origin is one of the best examples of a large, isolated, racially homogeneous immigrant rural group. The rural isolation has tended to perpetuate old country traditions, customs and language; Americanization has proceeded slowly, and there has been very little fusion or amalgamation either with natives or other race elements. The adult immigrants learn English much more slowly than in cities or in rural places where there is less segregation by race and religion. The parish priests use Italian almost exclusively; Italian is spoken in the home, the fields, at the social gatherings and to some extent in the school yard. Considering

these facts, the progress made by the North Italians, especially, in American citizenship and ideals is remarkable.

While the settlement of foreigners in large, compact groups has some advantages, chiefly to facilitate the founding of a colony, it is questionable whether the incorporation of these large, unas-similable alien lumps into the rural body politic is expedient in the long run. It is essential that the progressive inhabitant come into touch with the currents of American thought, American methods and American life as rapidly as possible. In one or two sections where the immigrants have purchased homes in districts settled by native farmers and have found themselves, so to speak, sandwiched in between American landowners, progress in amalgamation has been much more rapid, although the initial difficulties were greater for the foreigner.

The Italian rural settlers both in New York, New England and the Southern States are very largely small farmers engaged in truck growing, market gardening, berry culture or cotton raising. In general, they are owners of small holdings, though the form of land tenure is really a matter of the custom of the locality. For example, immigrant cotton growers are chiefly tenants who offer the highest competitive rents for the land they wish. In contrast, their Sicilian blood relatives who moved from the cotton districts to the hills of Arkansas, are all owners of the land they operate. The same may be said of Polish farmers, who are perhaps among the most eager of the home builders. The great majority own their farms, but in Texas among the cotton growers, in the old settlements of Illinois and Wisconsin, where land is high and necessary equipment expensive, and among the recent Slavic onion and tobacco growers of the Connecticut Valley tenants are very frequent. Immigrants of all races are profoundly affected by their environment, by the economic exigencies of the situation.

Nor are the Italians small farmers only, although all their old country knowledge and training inclines them to "petite culture." One of the most successful small colonies of Italians is located in western Wisconsin, where dairying, cattle raising and cereal crops are the chief agricultural sub-industries. Large herds of cattle, numerous horses, modern horse-power machinery they handle as easily and effectively as their neighbors, immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia. In whatever line of farming the Italians,

either North or South, have seriously engaged, they have demonstrated their adaptability and efficiency, frequently greater efficiency than their neighbors or predecessors. Whether raising fruit on the stony uplands of Connecticut or the sandy wastes of New Jersey, growing cotton on the black land of the Brazos Bottoms or vegetables on the black muck of western New York, cultivating strawberries on the Gulf coastal plain or potatoes in the cut-over region of northern Wisconsin, irrespective of climate, soil, topography or products of agriculture, the Italian immigrant on the land has made good as a producer. And where he has been given aid and encouragement he has proved a respectable citizen.

#### *Polish Farmers*

The Poles are a better known and perhaps a more important element in rural immigration. The first current of Polish immigrants set in from Poland to northern Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa during the 60's and 70's. The initial Polish immigrants were a superior sort. More or less independent abroad, they came to America to take up the new, free land and build homes for themselves. After 1885, when numerous Polish communities had been planted here and there over the Lake States and the western prairies, the character of the immigrants began to change. A smaller percentage are peasants or independent proprietors; more have been day laborers abroad, and in the United States have been employed in mines, quarries, steel mills and other industrial pursuits. They have been attracted to the land by advertisements in Polish newspapers or the solicitation of Polish land agents. They represent induced immigration; they settle in small groups; their choice of location is influenced or directed by outside persons. Having more ready money than their predecessors they have been able to purchase more of the tools and equipment essential to modern farming. These Polish settlers have proved promising pioneers and have developed a number of prosperous communities on the cut-over timber lands of northern Wisconsin, the less desirable prairies of the Dakotas and the unproductive land of Illinois and Indiana chiefly because these lands could be bought cheaply.

The settlement of Poles on the so-called abandoned farms of the East has not assumed significant proportions, nor is it at all probable that the more isolated hill towns of New England, for



example, will be populated by desirable alien farmers for many years to come. Until some money crop has been found, peculiarly adapted to the rough, stony soils, by means of which the newcomer can sustain himself until his depleted acres begin to produce abundantly, the ambitious Slav is not likely to take kindly to colonization on exhausted areas. The former occupants of the old eastern farms practiced a form of agriculture that for years proved uneconomic and eventually gave up the undertaking. The new arrival faces a worn-out soil, an obsolete agricultural system, the necessity for the reorganization of crops and farm practice, with no resources save his characteristic capacity for hard work, and usually a large and willing supply of labor in his family. He needs knowledge and current capital and a long period of waiting; meantime he finds it almost impossible to win a subsistence and accumulate any savings.

But on the more fertile areas, where high-priced land devoted to a specialized money crop, largely dependent on manual labor for its successful cultivation is characteristic, Polish immigrants, and Portuguese and Hebrews as well, have found agriculture a profitable occupation. In the Connecticut Valley, into which they first entered as farm hands about 1890, they are taking possession of the fertile onion and tobacco lands with increasing rapidity, both as tenants and as owners. In certain towns some of the very choicest of the old New England farm homes have passed into the ownership of Poles. Their large families and their willingness to work long hours enable them to out compete the American onion and tobacco growers. They are able to offer prices for land that the American owner cannot afford to refuse. Their natural increase is steadily overwhelming the decaying native population. There is scarcely a shadow of doubt that the foreign influx will take complete and permanent possession of many rich rural towns where agriculture is a profitable undertaking.

What has been said of the Poles in western Massachusetts may be said of the foreigners on the muck lands in west central New York, of the Portuguese in the town of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, of Hebrews and German-Swiss in the valley of western Connecticut and in certain localities in Maine, where Finns and Swedes have formed colonies. The tale is ever the same. Given a product that will return money in exchange for manual labor,

and cheap living, hard work, large families, long hours and little leisure will inevitably win in the competitive economic contest. Within a decade we may look to see a much larger number of immigrant groups occupying the pick of the soils of New York and New England.

#### *Co-operative Adaptability*

Among the Italians, and to some extent among the Poles and Portuguese, specialization of products by localities is a noteworthy economic feature of their agriculture. Practically every farmer in the community is engaged in raising the same principal product. Instead of competition this results in efficient rivalry, co-operative endeavor and highly specialized production. Strawberries, blackberries, sweet and Irish potatoes, tobacco and certain truck crops and orchard fruits were found occupying the entire attention of farmers in as many different localities.

In co-operative undertakings the foreigners have a distinct advantage over the native farmers because of their racial homogeneity. If class consciousness has not been adequately developed, there is at any rate a race consciousness which forms a groundwork for community spirit and commercial co-operative endeavor. At Independence, Louisiana, for example, where the marketing situation demanded a united interest, the Sicilian strawberry growers came together with commendable facility and effectiveness to market their berries and to purchase fertilizers and berry boxes. In several of the more northern colonies the Italians exhibit aptness in co-operating and unite very successfully to sell produce, to purchase supplies and equipment and to manufacture their surplus raw materials of agriculture. In establishing local co-operative business enterprises the immigrants are much more uniformly successful than their native white neighbors.

#### *Americanization and Assimilation*

It is remarkable that comparatively few Polish farmers in New England are recruited from the industrial centers. The Pole comes to the land directly from his home abroad. If he has not money to rent or purchase, he begins as a farm hand and in a very few years graduates as an owner of the farm. Coming from abroad the greater number have little or no knowledge of English and none of American civic ideals or community life. For this

reason some thoughtful people have greatly regretted the inflow of immigrants to rural New England.

This movement is, however, economically inevitable under present conditions, and while Slavic farmers are less satisfactory than New Englanders, they are better than no farmers at all. Moreover, the prosperous condition of their agriculture materially hastens their Americanization. New England is beginning to recognize and make provision for their educational needs, and night schools, library facilities and instruction in civics and morals are being placed at the disposal of the rural foreign-born groups.

In general, all foreign rural communities in the East, particularly Hebrew farm colonies, where not very large nor closely segregated, manifest a lively desire to speak and read English, to adopt American dress, customs and methods of farm practice, and where encouraged, to seek naturalization as quickly as possible. There is no question that assimilation and Americanization take place more rapidly among the less segregated rural immigrants than in congested industrial groups in urban localities. Land ownership confers dignity, imposes financial and social responsibility, stimulates activity in civic affairs and awakens community interest and personal pride. In short, so far as the immigrant is concerned rural life in most instances has had a most salutary effect. It has frequently taken an ignorant, abject, unskilled, dependent foreign laborer and made of him a shrewd, self-respecting, independent farmer and citizen. His returns in material welfare are not great, but he lives happily, comfortably and peaceably and in time accumulates a small property. The second generation of these south European immigrants are frequently not less progressive than the Americans.

### *Leadership*

One influential factor in the social and civic progress of the rural group is the quality of its leadership. In the southern colonies, situated in states with inadequate rural schools and non-compulsory attendance laws; where there is little incentive to local political activity; where tenant neighbors take little interest in citizenship or community affairs, the lack of strong leadership is very noticeable. Few have qualified as voters, and the percentage of illiteracy is relatively high. Certain southern colonies, however,

have been fortunate in possessing strong and wise leaders, American or foreign, who have insisted on educational facilities and religious institutions; have urged early naturalization and encouraged participation in public affairs; and have made plain the way to Americanization and higher standards of living. To these opportunities the foreigners respond promptly and eagerly.

Between the Italian cotton tenants of the Mississippi Delta region, among whom are few citizens, numerous illiterates, few children in school, very meagre community institutions and no political interest and their kinsmen in upland Arkansas with a majority of naturalized citizens, a most lively participation in public matters, exceptionally fine educational and religious institutions, little illiteracy and a rapidly rising standard of comfort, the contrast is most striking. The social superiority of the upland Arkansas colony is due largely to efficient leadership and individual ownership of land. Other instances might be cited to demonstrate the very significant truth that progress is much more rapid and satisfactory where there is some one to lend a friendly hand from the beginning.



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